

The Nature of the Movement for  
Parliamentary Reform in England  
in the Eighteenth Century and  
the Influence of the French  
Revolution Upon that Movement

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In order to understand the movement for parliamentary reform in the 18th century it is necessary to take a brief view of the defects in the composition of the House of Commons and of the abuses made possible by the inadequate representation. The state of the representation may be considered under four heads : Inequality of the constituencies; System of patronage and barter; Restrictions and complications of the franchise; Mode of conducting and deciding elections.

The total number of representatives of the House of Commons was 558, of which Scotland sent 45 and Wales 24, leaving 489 members for England, 80 from the counties and 409 from the boroughs. Each borough and each county sent two members regardless of size, so that a borough of six inhabitants sent as many representatives as a county of several hundred. A few statements will show the utter inequality of such a system of representation. Of the 513 members for England and Wales, 257 were chosen by 11,075 persons, while the whole number of electors was estimated to be 2,000,000 <sup>1</sup> that is, a majority of the representatives was chosen by little more than a 170th part of the people to be represented. Some of the boroughs had practically no inhabitants. In a speech at a county meeting in 1782 Stanhope said: "There is a borough in the county of sussex near the seat of a peer, and his park wall

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, Vol. 3, Appendix, Page 195.



has six or eight black stones in it, each one of which has a vote for a member of Parliament." <sup>1</sup> Of fifty-six members in the House no one had a constituency of more than 38 electors, and six had a constituency of not more than three. <sup>2</sup>

This imperfect mode of representation gave rise to the system of patronage. Patronage may be divided into two heads: Nomination and Influence. Nomination was the absolute right of a patron to command the return in a borough, and was exercised in boroughs from which the population had practically disappeared. Influence was a degree of right acquired in a borough which enabled a patron to recommend a candidate, and induced the electors, either from fear, private interests, or incapacity to oppose, to accept the nominee without question. The Society of the Friends of the People in a report in 1793 declared that 306 out of the 513 members for England and Wales were returned by the nomination or influence of 162 Peers and Commoners. <sup>3</sup> The 45 members from Scotland were nominated by 35 persons. <sup>4</sup>

In the open boroughs seats were sold with scarcely any attempt at concealment. Early in the century there was a regular set of stock-jobbers who made this their business. <sup>5</sup> Burnet says that at the elections of 1701 a most scandalous practice was brought in of buying votes with so little decency that the electors engaged themselves by subscription to choose a blank person before they were trusted with the name of their candidate. <sup>6</sup>

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, Vol 2, p. 55.
2. Lecky, History of England, Vol. 3, p. 188.
3. Wyvill, Political Papers, Vol. 3, Appendix, p. 229.
4. Lecky, History of England, Vol. 2, p. 82.
5. Chesterfield, to Son, Dec. 19th, 1767.
6. Burnet, History of His Own Time, Vol. 4, p. 464.

It is said that before the American war it would be difficult to name one member for the open boroughs who did not obtain his seat by a large expenditure for corrupt purposes.<sup>1</sup>

In regard to the right of franchise no fixed principle existed. Burgage hold, leasehold, freehold, scot and lot, inhabitant householder, inhabitant at large, potwalloper,<sup>3</sup> and commonality, each in different borough prevailed. The returning officer often spent whole days in investigating the title to one of these qualifications and had unlimited opportunity for making false returns, which happened not infrequently.<sup>4</sup> Any officer who refused to be bribed was quite likely to be removed.<sup>5</sup> Freeholders, themselves, were not sure of their own rights. The freeholders of Yorkshire had not been polled for sixty years, and when Sir George Saville canvassed them in 1780 he found some who, never having been called upon to exercise the elective franchise, did not know that they possessed the right to vote.<sup>6</sup>

Elections were conducted with inconvenience to the electors and great expense to the candidate. The poll was taken only in one

1. Massey, History of England, Vol. 2, p= 61.
3. Burgage hold,- Tenure by which houses or lands were hel of a lord of a borough at a certain yearly rent or by services relating to trade. Leasehold - tenure by lease which constituted a valid title in the premises for the period described Freehold - any estate of inheritance or for life held by a free tenure. Scot and lot - a parish assessment, the ability to pay which sometimes constituted a right to vote. Inhabitant householder - a resident householder. Inhabitant at large - a non-resident who had property rights in the borough. Potwalloper - one who boiled (walloped) his pot in the parish for six month.
4. Hansard, Parliamentary History, Vol. 6, p. 226, note. Ibid., Vol 7, p 949.
5. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 379.
6. Wyvill, Political Papers, Vol. 3, p. 214.

Fixed place, and the non-resident had to travel many miles or forego his right to vote. The candidate usually not only bore this expense for conveyance but also paid for the loss of time and for the maintenance of the voter during the time of his journey.<sup>1</sup> The polls could legally be protracted forty days until 1785, when the time was limited to fifteen days.<sup>2</sup> Even this limited time gave opportunity for bribery and fraud, and elections were often scenes of tumult and disorder.<sup>3</sup>

If the elections returns was disputed, the case was tried at the bar of the House previous to the Grenville Act of 1770, and after that by a select committee appointed by the House.<sup>4</sup> All through the century there were numerous election petitions and the House spent an extraordinary amount of time debating them. In 1728 there were seventy petitions and the House spent most of its time deciding controverted elections.<sup>5</sup> In 1755 Walpole says: "The House hears nothing but elections; the Oxfordshire till seven at night three times a week; we have past ten evening on Colchester and last Monday night sat upon it till nearly two in the morning."<sup>6</sup> But, notwithstanding the long time taken in the discussion of these petitions and the virtuous sentiments expressed by the debaters, they seemed to be adjudged with great partiality and almost always in favor of the majority. The time seems not to have been spent in careful investigation, but to have

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, Vol. 3, Appendix, p. 210.
2. Hansard, Parliamentary History, Vol. 25, p. 20.
3. Wyvill, Political Papers, Vol. 3, Appendix, p. 211.
4. Hansard, Parliamentary History, Vol. 16, p. 924.
5. Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 949. Lecky, History of England, Vol. 3, p. 188.
6. Walpole, Letters, Vol. 3, p. 287.

been employed for party purposes. In speaking of the election contests of 1701 Burnet says: "For weeks the House seems to have forgotten all the concerns of Europe and was wholly employed in the weakening of one side and the fortifying of the other."<sup>1</sup> Speaker Onslow declared: "It has really come to be deemed by many a piece of virtue and honor to do injustice in these cases. The right is in the friend, and not in the cause. and he is laughed at by leaders of parties who have scruples upon it."<sup>2</sup> The Grenville Act in 1770 referring the decisions to a select committee remedied the evil to some extent, yet we find the committee dragged on the proceedings sometimes for months in a single case, and often the decision of appeals was postponed for years.<sup>3</sup>

The foregoing sketch shows that there was very little purity in the composition of the House of Commons. There were the same glaring abuses in the workings of the House. The large and unwarranted pension list, the multiplication of court places, the unlimited secret service fund, and the system of issuing government loans and distributing them at extravagant prices among the partisans of the government, all were important sources of corruption. In 1770, 192 members of the House of Commons held places under the government.<sup>4</sup> Although a bill existed excluding persons from the House who held pensions at the pleasure of the

1. Burnet, History of His Own Time, Vol. 4, p. 365.

2. Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 410.

3. Wyvill, Political Papers, Vol. 3, p. 222.

4. Annual Register, 1770, p. 72.

king, or for a term of years, there was no means of enforcing the law, in as much as pensions were secret. As evidence that the law was treated with contempt, a bill compelling members to swear that they were not receiving pensions was defeated three times.<sup>2</sup> In the first Parliament of George I. out of 500 members there were 271 holding offices, pensions, or sinecures.<sup>3</sup> And the number undoubtedly greatly increased during the reigns of George I. and George II. It was said that members of Parliament bought seats as they would buy lottery tickets, hoping that it might prove a successful financial venture.<sup>4</sup>

When we consider the appalling extent of the corruption of the whole parliamentary system it seems remarkable that the movement for reform was so slow and feeble in its growth. But the controlling aristocracy had no desire for a change, and the mass of the people had little opportunity for intercourse or co-operation on account of the difficulties of transportation and communication. The Stamp Act imposed in 1715 practically excluded news papers from the lower class. In 1777, when the news paper tax was imposed, Lord North spoke of newspaper reading as one of the luxuries of life and as an idle curiosity.<sup>5</sup> In 1790 there were only a little over 70 newspapers published in the whole kingdom.

1. 13 William III. chap. 2.

2. Lecky, History of England, vol. III. p. 185.

3. May, Constitutional History of England, vol. I. p. 317.

4. Keppel, Memoirs of Rockingham, vol. II. p. 398.

5. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 19. p. 246.

In Parliament itself there were always a few statesmen of honesty and integrity who desired to root out abuses. George Onslow, who was Speaker of the House for thirty years during the first half of the century, always favored reform, especially the excision of rotten boroughs.<sup>1</sup> A proposition for the reduction of the duration of Parliament was made by Bromley in 1734, was ably supported by Windham, and defeated by only a small majority.<sup>2</sup> A similar proposition was made in 1745 by Sir Francis Dashwood, and defeated by only a 145 to 113.<sup>3</sup> In 1776 the Earl of Chatham denounced the corruption and venality of boroughs. In 1770 he declared for triennial Parliaments and proposed adding a third member to the counties to counteract the influence of the corrupt boroughs.<sup>4</sup> In 1776 Wilkes introduced a motion which was said to contain all the leading principles of parliamentary reform adopted during the next fifty years.<sup>5</sup> But these were individual motions, and did not express any desire for reform on the part of the members as a whole, nor did they have any connection with the outside public. Against the corruption in the existing system numerous bills were passed. From the death of William III. to the death of George II., twenty-three bills were passed to preserve the independence of Parliament, to regulate election, and to prevent bribery. Penalties for the conviction of bribery were severe.<sup>6</sup> Scarcely a year passed without the discussion

1. Lecky, History of England, vol. 1, p. 470.

2. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 9, p. 479.

3. Ibid., vol. 13, p. 1107.

4. Pitt, Correspondence, vol. 3, p. 457; vol. 4, p. 174.

5. Cambridge Modern History, vol. 10, p. 599.

6. Hansard Parliamentary History, vol. 8, p. 701. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. 3, p. 234.

of the matter in Parliament. Yet all these seem to have been merely conventional or statutory laws, and not to have denoted any wholesome attitude toward reform. The reform bills were passed unthinkingly, and were disregarded with impunity, while corruption went on increasing.

It is obvious that the majority of the members of Parliament would themselves be disposed to avoid reformation, and that any serious attempt in this direction would necessarily come from the outside. The year 1768, therefore, when we have the first indications of such a movement, marks the beginning of the era of parliamentary reform. The movement of this year was the result of an attempt on the part of the house to expel Wilkes, who had three times been returned by the county of Middlesex. Seventeen counties held meetings to protest against the action of Parliament, and to support the electors of Middlesex. These petitions were signed by 600,000 electors. Some of these petitions were confined to the violated rights of electors while others were more diffuse, Yorkshire, Westminster, and some others, praying in express terms for the dissolution of Parliament.<sup>1</sup> But the more formidable demands were those embodied in the instructions to members of Parliament. This practise became quite common in 1769. In March of that year, the Gentleman's Magazine stated that, "instructions to representatives are now so much the fashion that the inhabitants of London instruct their common council men."<sup>2</sup> The instructions from the various constituencies to their members in Parliament

1. Annual Register, 1770, p. 59.

2. Gentleman's Magazine, 1769, p. 210.



were practically identical. Among the demands contained in these instructions, besides those occasioned directly by the recent agitation, such as the right of electors, of trial by jury, of habeus corpus, were others asking for a Place Bill, shorter duration of Parliament, inquiry into the heavy national debt, exclusion of contractors, prevention of influence in election, and the use of public money for such purpose, and even a proposition for a change from the existing mode of election to that by ballot.<sup>1</sup> But this practise was strongly opposed by a majority of the members of Parliament, who objected to being bound by their constituents. Burke said the theory, if acted upon, would ultimately destroy the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> The Gentleman's Magazine quotes a remarkable speech an address of Alderman Beckford at a Common Hall in London, in which Beckford approved of sending instructions to members of Parliament as constitutional, and said: "If instructions were given to me, inconsistent with my own sentiments, I would not oppose my judgement to that of six thousand of my fellow citizens."<sup>3</sup> About this time Rockingham said: "Bring a representative would be a disgraceful bondage if it were to lock up the reasoning faculties of deliberation and of judgement and preclude you from acting according to your conscience at the moment."<sup>4</sup> Due to the

1. Gentleman's Magazine: 1769, pp. 37, 74, 75.
2. Kent, The English Radicals, p. 93.
3. Gentleman's Magazine, 1769, p. 90.
4. Keppel, Memoirs of Rockingham, vol. 2, p. 395.



opposition of members of Parliament, this practise of sending instructions died out in a few years.<sup>1</sup> With the cessation of these instructions the whole movement was practically at an end. It had been confined almost entirely to the voters whose rights were in danger of being infringed, and was not participated in to any extent by the unenfranchised. Some popular indignation was seemingly expressed through riots and conflicts with the authorities, but it was a sort of sympathetic display, which indicated no awakening of political thought on the part of the masses.

The movement was revived again in 1779 this movement was radically different from the earlier movement of 1769. It was not based upon any principle or theory of government, but had an economic basis for its origin. The American war may have contributed to the movement simply in advancing the theory of taxation and representation, for, as has been said, "The American contest fanned the latent embers of democracy through out all Europe."<sup>2</sup> But undoubtedly there was a much stronger connection between the American Revolution and the attempt at parliamentary reform in England, as the American war was responsible for the economic condition which gave rise to the movement. It is generally recognized that with nations, as with individuals, the only chance for developement, progress, and content, lies in a sound economic condition. Whenever the economics foundation of a nation begins to totter we immediately expect general depression, discontent, and political upheaval.

1. Lecky, History of England, vol. 3, p. 191.

2. May, Constitutional History of England, vol. 2, p. 214.

The contention, that the movement of 1779 had an economic basis, is born out by Wyvill's account of the origin and of the earliest proceedings of that movement; "The grounds upon which the people commenced their opposition," he says, "were chosen with propriety; the hardships of an expensive war and the glaring abuses of the management of the public purse."<sup>1</sup> In December of 1779, in the great northern county of York, a few private country gentlemen of the North-Riding decided upon expediency of calling a meeting to consider the distressful state of the country.<sup>2</sup> The death of the high sheriff of the county making it impossible to immediately obtain a meeting in the ordinary way, the originators of the idea procured the signatures of 212 gentlemen to their request, and the call was made through the York Courant, December 14, 1779, giving the request and signatures.<sup>3</sup> In response to this advertisement a meeting was held December 30.<sup>4</sup> The first meeting was of sufficient importance to be considered in detail. On the afternoon of the 29th of December there was a preliminary meeting of many gentlemen at York Tavern to prepare and discuss measures for the coming meeting.<sup>5</sup> A committee, with Mr. Wyvill as chairman, drew up a petition which met with decisive approbation by the preliminary meeting, and the next day was adopted by the county meeting with but one dissenting voice.<sup>6</sup> This petition was

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. 1, p. 366.
2. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 9.
3. Annual Register, 1780, p. 85.
4. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. 1, p. XII.
5. Ibid., vol 1, p. 4.
6. Ibid., vol 1, p. 7.

strictly economic and aimed at no specific measure of reform in regard to representation or duration of Parliament. It began by declaring, "That the nation hath been engaged for several years in a most expensive and unfortunate war; that the consequences hath been a large addition to the national debt, a heavy accumulation of taxes, a rapid decline of trade, manufactures, and land rents of the kingdom" and after stating the corrupt condition of Parliament it requested, "That before any new burdens be laid upon the country effective measures may be taken by the House of Commons to inquire into and correct the gross abuses in expenditure of public money; to reduce exorbitant emoluments; to abolish all sinecure places and unmerited pensions; and to appropriate the produce to the necessities of the state."<sup>1</sup> This petition was circulated through the county, signed by nearly 9,000 freeholders, and presented to Parliament.<sup>2</sup> There are two important questions to be considered in connection with the signing of this petition at this stage: the personnel of the framers and signers; the real basis for their grievance. It was conducted by the most respectable classes of the community, the country gentlemen and clergy,<sup>3</sup> as supported by preponderance of property.<sup>4</sup> In introducing the measure into the House of Commons Sir George Saville said: "In the hall where this petition was conceived more propriety was represented than within the walls of this House."<sup>5</sup> The propriety of the persons petitioning was supposed

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol 1. p. 7.
2. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 19, p. 1466.
3. The clergy were highly censured from high authority for their active part in the association. The Archbishop of York said such participation was "Foreign to the functions of a clergyman and not the road to preferment."
4. Annual Register, 1780 p. 86. 5. Ibid., 1780, p. 88.

to be not less than 800,000 pounds.<sup>1</sup> This was estimated to be half of what the county possessed, yet it was signed by less than 9,000 of the 30,000 freeholders of York, or little more than one-fourth of the whole number, which shows conclusively<sup>2</sup> that those taking part were the wealthiest of the county. It might be thought that this class of men could easily bear the additional burdens of the times, yet, in this fourth year of the war, they seemed to feel severely the pressure of heavy taxation.<sup>3</sup> In their declaration they complained of three things: The addition to the national debt; the heavy accumulation of taxes; and the decline of trade, manufactures, and land rents of the kingdom. Since the beginning of the war, 68,000,000 pounds had been added to the national debt.<sup>4</sup> The new taxes that had been imposed up to this time affected this class almost entirely. In 1777 Lord North said: "In a commercial and manufacturing country, customs and excises, and taxes which evidently affect the merchant and manufacturer ought to be avoided; so ought all taxes which are felt by the lower part of the community. It remains with the government to provide for expenses in such a manner as to throw the weight as much as possible upon the opulent, or in other words to tax property instead of labor."<sup>5</sup> There is no reason to doubt Stanhope's statement in 1779 that "The land bears the burden on the war."<sup>6</sup>

1. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 21, p. 81.

2. Ibid., vol. 21, p. 74.

3. Ibid., vol. 20, p. 1374.

4. Lecky, History of England, vol. 4, p. 194.

5. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol 19, p. 241.

6. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. 2, p. 55.

The first revenue measure of the war was to raise the land tax from 3 shillings to 4 shillings on the pound. Then the principle taxes up to 1780, those on men-servants, on private carriages, on posting, (A mode of locomotion among the higher class) and on wine, all would be borne almost entirely by these same people.<sup>1</sup> With all these additional burdens land rent had fallen one-third in value.<sup>2</sup>

When the petition was adopted Sir Thomas Franklin, who was himself a member of the House, suggested in a tone of despondency, that the petition without doubt would be treated with contempt by the House.<sup>3</sup> It must be kept in mind that the modern system of petitioning did not exist at this time, and petitions did not ordinarily receive any considerable degree of attention. Mr Wyvill then suggested that, in order to give this petition greater weight, and to prepare for it a continued and effectual support, an association be formed with other counties, cities, and towns.<sup>4</sup> In accordance with this suggestion an elaborate system of committees and sub-committees was organized, active correspondence was carried on, circular letters were sent out, and as a result twenty-four counties, six cities, and six towns identified themselves with the movement.<sup>5</sup> Some of these did not actually associate but adopted measures in favor of the objects of the Yorkshire association.<sup>6</sup> The geographical basis of

1. Dowell, History of Taxation of England, pp. 165, to 182.

2. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 21, pp. 82 and 403.

3. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. 1, p. XIII.

4. Ibid.,

5. Annual Register. 1780, p. 87.

6. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. 1. p. 381.

the movement included all the counties except Hampshire south of the Thames, all except Oxford immediately north of it, three more adjoining these, and the northern counties of York, Chester, and Derby, leaving a body of ten central counties which refused to take part in the movement. These ten counties represented roughly the trading interest, while those petitioning represented the land interests. The reform movement was confined almost entirely to the land owners. The traders seemed to take but little interest in it. Circular letters sent out to the towns, cities, and boroughs in 1782 did not receive a very ready response. A majority were opposed to any innovation in the existing system.<sup>1</sup> The letter from the mayor of Dartmouth said, "The gentlemen of this town, being chiefly engaged in merchandise, had have not much turned their thoughts to the subject."<sup>2</sup>

An interesting difference to be noted between the meetings of 1769 and those of 1779 is the closer connection of the earlier ones with political parties. In the first case, the securing of the petition from the seventeen counties for the dissolution of Parliament was in some cases a deliberate scheme of the Whigs of the opposition.<sup>3</sup> But a distinct characteristic of the later movement was its lack of connection with political parties. The Whigs early opposed it as advocating measures of too drastic a character, and the reformers themselves preferred to have all

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. 2, pp. 72 to 180.

2. Ibid., vol 2. p. 121.

3. Keppel, Memoirs of Rockingham, vol.2, p. 136.

measures originate with the people.<sup>1</sup> In the first meeting of December 30, 1779 there were 11 lords and 14 members of the House of Commons who approved and supported the economic<sup>2</sup> petition. At the second meeting, March 28, 1780 the peers refused to attend because they were not willing to accede to the proposition of the reformers for triennial parliaments and for a more adequate representation of the people.<sup>3</sup> February 28, it was resolved to exclude members of Parliament from the meeting of deputies to be held at London, in order that the deputation might have a strictly non-political character.<sup>4</sup> Debates in the county meetings showed that the reformers had no more faith in Whigism than in Toryism. Yet until the death of Rockingham there was some effort to keep in connection with the Whig lord, and to make concessions to them when possible. Rockingham, himself, whom they regarded as their particular friend, seemed opposed to every thing but the economic petition. Letters to Mr. Milnes, February 28, and to Rev. Zouch, March 23, showed that he considered their scheme for reform as vague, crude, and premature propositions. He declared himself opposed to annual parliaments, to the binding of representatives by their constituencies, to a change in the representation, etc.<sup>5</sup> Wyvill says that it was due to his wish that the committee to substitute a proposition for triennial instead of for annual Parliaments by the meeting of March 28. Rockingham had promised if this concession was

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol, 1, p. 112. Note.

2. Ibid., vol 1, p. 6.

3. Ibid., vol 1, p. XIV.

4. Ibid., vol 1, p. 120.

5. Keppel, Memoirs of Rockingham, vol. 2. pp. 395 and 402.



made, the petition would be favored by himself and friends in the House of Lords, but his friends disavowed having authorized<sup>1</sup> any such engagements, and refused their support. The Duke of Portland declared that he wished that the associated counties had confined themselves to the economic petition, and declared himself opposed to the addition of one hundred members to the counties on the grounds that was prejudicial to the democratic part of the kingdom by throwing too great weight into the scale<sup>2</sup> of the aristocracy. The Whig members of the House of Commons were little more in favor of the proposed reform. Even some of the most liberal members, who were heartily in favor of correcting and purifying the Parliament as it stood, could not comply with the terms of the association. Sir Cecil Wray said that in his opinion such propositions were contrary to universal<sup>3</sup> opinion. Mr. Stanhope tried to dissuade them from adopting such principles. L. J. Cavendish opposed them and the reformers were forced to oppose him in the election of 1784 in spite of their belief in his integrity and the claim of his family to public respect.<sup>4</sup> Burke was violently opposed to any change in the existing system. Even Sir George Saville refused to sign the association.<sup>5</sup> With the possible exceptions of Fox and Sheridan, Sir William Pitt seems to have been the only one who was heartily in favor of the reform. In 1782 and 1783, his resolutions for reform were in harmony with the demands of the association, and his Reform Bill of 1785 seems to have been elaborated.

1. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. I, p. XVII.

2. Keppel, Memoirs of Rockingham, vol. II, p. 410.

3. Ibid, vol. II, p. 400.

4. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. I, p. XV.

5. Ibid, vol. II, p. 154.



orated in conjunction with the Yorkshire reformers. But by this time the reform spirit had greatly gone down. Only eight petitions were presented in favor of his bill, which was defeated by a large majority.<sup>2</sup> The association itself had become disintegrated. Forty nine out of the 150 members withdrew at one time in 1784, and as this was the most active body in the whole association, the decline of interest in it may be taken as a fair estimate of the general change of attitude towards the subject.<sup>3</sup>

By this time the causes of complaint mentioned in their first petition no longer existed. The American war had closed. The demand for its cessation had received one third of the space of the first petition. The abuses and the mismanagement of the public fund had been done away with. Revenue officers had been disqualified, contractors excluded from Parliament, offices diminished, secret service fund limited, the pension list reduced, expenses regulated finances reorganized, and the administration was pursuing a policy of peace and economy.<sup>4</sup> This was the end which the reformers had sought, and now that the purpose had been accomplished, the demand for a change in the representative system had few adherents.

It is some times erroneously stated, and often suggested,<sup>5</sup> that the reform movement in England was checked or postponed by the French Revolution. Lord Grey, in a speech in Parliament

1. Stanhope, Life of Pitt, vol. I, pp. 73, 116 and 256.
2. Ibid. Also Lecky, History of England, vol. V, p. 62.
3. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. II, p. 321.
4. 22 George III, chp. 82. 24 George III, chapters 37, 38, 47. 26 George III, chap. 59. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 22 pp. 1345, 1356, and 1361.
5. Skotomne, A Short History of Parliament, p. 252. Terry, History of England,

themselves, and Stanhope says that Pitt realized that nothing but the pressure of the strongest popular feeling, such as did not then exist, could have induced many to take this step.<sup>1</sup> Another prominent Whig said he hoped this decided defeat would stop any future discussion of the subject.<sup>2</sup> The Industrial Revolution undoubtedly would ultimately have brought reform, but under the existing conditions, it seems improbable that the Whigs would have seriously considered the matter during the eighteenth century.

The political societies which had been organized for the purpose of advocating parliamentary reform, had ceased to have any active life. The Quintuple Alliance was a small unknown club. The Society for Constitutional Information, which in 1780 had succeeded the society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights, and which had at first been supported by many prominent men of wealth, at this period, was unknown to the public, had slight funds, and was only saved from a natural death by the French Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Just previous to 1790 there was practically no agitation for parliamentary reform from any source, and it seems improbable that there would have been any further movement in that direction in the eighteenth century had it not been for the French Revolution.

In 1789 the French Revolution broke out. At the beginning of the Revolution the general opinion in England seemed to be

1. Stanhope, Life of Pitt, vol. I, p. 258.
2. Stopford-Sackville, Papers, vol. I. p. 744.
3. Steven, Life of Tooke, vol. I, pp. 163, 455. Vol. II, p. 114.  
Stanhope, Life of Pitt, vol. II, p. 65.  
May, Constitutional History of England, vol. I, p. 281.  
Adolphus, History of England, vol. V, p. 212.

in favor of it, and many sincerely believed in its tendency to favor the cause of national liberty. The admiration of the revolution at this stage was regarded with little, if any, alarm because it was believed to be an admiration of liberty from an abstract point of view, and not interpreted as an indication of any dissatisfaction with the British government. But it was soon found that the revolution in France was producing a revolution in the minds of men in England, and creating a spirit that might profoundly affect the internal affairs of the kingdom. From the triumphs of the French Revolution, there emerged in England ideas of public rights that had never existed before. Political intelligence and political aspirations, for the first time, were awakened among the lower class, among artisans, laborers, factory hands, and workmen of all sorts. This newly awakened spirit found expression chiefly by means of political associations. In November, 1789, when the Revolutionary Society met, it adopted a congratulatory address to the National Assembly of France, and issued a call to the people of England, "to establish societies throughout the kingdom, to maintain a correspondence with each other, and to form that grand concentrated union of true friends of public liberty which<sup>1</sup> may be necessary to maintain its existence." In accordance with this suggestion numerous societies were soon formed all over the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> The most important of these was the London Corresponding Society which deserves some particular attention.

1. Gifford, Life of Pitt, vol. II, p. 428.

2. Ibid, vol. III, p. 4.

The London Corresponding Society is typical of the new spirit in its origin and progress. The founders and supporters of the societies established previous to 1789 had been to a large extent men of wealth and influence, but the promoter of this new society was an humble shoemaker,--Thomas Hardy. He first detailed his plan of an association at a supper given at his house to neighbors, and these, with six other inferior tradesmen, constituted the original members of the association.<sup>1</sup> They contributed a penny each for the propagation of their political principles, which consisted of a reform comprehending annual parliaments and universal suffrage.<sup>2</sup> From this small beginning the society had a tremendous growth. In 1792, it had increased to 200 members and took the name of The London Corresponding Society.<sup>3</sup> Every effort was made to extend the society, and it soon obtained an immense accession of numbers and influence. It was organized in groups of thirty each division having a secretary at the head, and meeting once a week.<sup>4</sup> Soon it had branch societies in every populous town in England.<sup>5</sup> According to a report of the Secret Committee of the House of Commons, in 1794, the society had drawn up a catalogue of the manufacturing districts, showing the populous towns as a field where their efforts were most likely to bear fruit.<sup>6</sup> Its declared intention was to collect the opinion and

1. Stephen, Life of Tooke, vol. II, p. 82.  
Cooke, History of Party, vol. III, p. 412.
2. Stephen. Life of Tooke, vol. II, p. 83.
3. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 31, p. 480.
4. State Trials, vol. 24, p. 578.
5. Cooke, History of Party, vol. II, p. 413.
6. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 31, p. 450.  
Gifford, Life of Pitt, vol. IV, p. 122.

to note the determination of the unrepresented of the people.<sup>1</sup>  
The ready response with which its efforts were attended is  
shown by the fact that in a few years it numbered many thou-  
sands.<sup>2</sup>

The other society of national importance was the Society  
for Constitutional Information, but it was never to be compared  
with the London Corresponding Society either in magnitude or  
in activity, and probably its chief importance was due to the  
respect with which its leader, Horne Tooke, was held.

Local societies, in affiliation with these societies, were  
known variously as Constitutional Society, Reformation Society,  
Patriotic Society, Society of the Friends of the People, So-  
ciety for Political Information, Society of the Rights of Man,  
etc. There was great activity among these societies in all  
larger towns.<sup>3</sup> Manchester, with 30,000 inhabitants, had three  
active societies.<sup>4</sup> Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham,  
Bristol, Coventry, Derby, Leicester, Norwich, Hereford, York,  
Southwark, and Bradford, were the other most active towns.<sup>5</sup>

The people composing these societies were almost all work-  
men.<sup>6</sup> The middle class abhorred the clubbists.<sup>7</sup> Alarmed at  
the sympathetic attitude of some of the Whig leaders in the  
House of Commons, the country gentlemen deserted them in a

1. Howell, State Trials. vol. 24, p. 323.
2. Stephen, Life of Tooke, vol. II, p. 83.  
Kent, The English Radicals, p. 147.
3. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 31, p. 490.  
Howell, State Trials. vol. 24, pp. 308 to 315.
4. Ibid., vol. 25, p. 1084.
5. Ibid., vol. 24, pp. 308 to 315.
6. Wyvill, Political Papers, vol. III, Appendix, p. 96.  
Gifford, Life of Pitt, vol. IV, p. 6.
7. Ibid., vol. IV, p. 7.

body.<sup>1</sup> The country gentlemen outside of parliament were even more thoroughly frightened, and spread the most alarming reports<sup>2</sup> of the excesses of the reformers.

To sum up briefly; In the course of three years, these Societies, from obscure beginnings, had developed into a great united organization, numbering probably 500,000,<sup>3</sup> composed almost entirely of the working class in the manufacturing towns,<sup>4</sup> and demanding annual parliaments and manhood suffrage.

The demand for such a radical reformation, supported by such numbers of a hitherto indifferent class, can only be accounted for by the French Revolution. There had been no mention of reform between 1785 and 1790. The political societies, as has been seen, were nothing more than small clubs of no general importance, and had not more than half a dozen members who attended regularly.<sup>5</sup> The economic conditions were not such as could be held directly responsible for the movement, as they were for the movement of 1779. By 1790 England was recovering from the effects of the American War, and there was no reason for any particular discontent among the masses. The lower class had no cause to complain of taxation or of oppression. The French writer, De Tocqueville, said, "For centuries the only inequalities of taxation in England were those which had been made in favor of the lower class."<sup>6</sup> Arthur Young, in a

1. Cooke, History of Party, vol. III, p. 381.
2. Johns Hopkins University Studies, vol. 27, p. 528.
3. Fox, Memoirs and Correspondence, vol. III, p. 329.
4. Stephen, Life of Tooke, vol. II, pp. 82, 112.
5. Fox, Memoirs and Correspondence, vol. III, p. 126.
6. Howell, State Trials, vol. 25. p. 38.
6. Lecky, Democracy and Liberty, vol. I, p. 339.

speech at the beginning of the French Revolution, said, "We have many taxes in England, but the poor do not pay them; moreover, we have an English tax paid by the rich for the relief of the poor."<sup>1</sup> The movement could not be attributed to the hardships necessarily attending any war, for the societies were in a flourishing condition long before the war with France was declared, and before the effects of it could in any way have been felt by the people as a whole. It was no internal condition, but the direct effect of the French Revolution that awakened political inquiry and gave birth to the demand for parliamentary reform on democratic principles.

It seems impossible to tell just how far this influence was due to direct agents or emissaries of the French government. That there was a large influx of French into the kingdom, who came for the express purpose of maintaining close communication with the seditious societies, was generally believed at the time.<sup>2</sup> Even Fox, who usually denied the existence of any sedition, said in 1793, "Perhaps the most prevailing reason for rushing into war with France is the existence of sedition and discontent at home fomented by foreign emissaries."<sup>3</sup> But in the report of the Committee of Secrecy in the House concerning seditious societies, and in the state trials of the leading members, the fact that French agents had any direct connection is not clearly shown. There seems to be no substantial evidence that French agents were responsible to any great extent.

The societies were likewise accused of carrying on a reg-

1. Lecky, Democracy and Liberty, vol. I, p. 339.
2. Miles, Correspondence, vol. I, p. 472.  
Annual Register, 1793, pp. 35.  
Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 30, p. 238.
3. Fox, Memoirs and Correspondence, vol. III, p. 27.



ular and revolutionary correspondence with French societies.<sup>1</sup> But neither does this fact seem to be substantiated. It is true that congratulatory addresses to the National Convention of France were adopted by most of the societies in England,<sup>2</sup> and there was some slight correspondence between the two leading societies there and two or three French societies before war was declared. In the documents presented at the trial of Hardy, founder of the London Corresponding Society, letters were produced from the Society of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity at Laon, and from the Popular and Republican Society of Apt. But this correspondence was very limited, and all the letters were dated 1792.<sup>3</sup> At the trial of Tooke the secretary of the Society for Constitutional Information declared that no direct or indirect correspondence had been carried on with any person in France after war was declared, and that only a few letters were written previous to that.<sup>4</sup> But it is not necessary to prove any direct agency before we can conclude that the French Revolution was responsible for this movement in England, for the contagious effect of the French doctrines resulted in an enthusiasm that swept over all Europe. But in keeping with their character of intelligence and moderation, and their inbred loyalty to existing institutions, the English lower class accepted these doctrines with restrictions. Reform, and nor revolution, was their object. Their idea was to apply French principles to their own institutions, but not to create a new or different form of government. That a revolu-

1. Gifford, Life of Pitt, vol V. p 275.

2. Howell, State Trials, vol. 24, pp. 315, 317.

3. Ibid, vol. 25, pp. 90 to 97.

4. Ibid, vol 25, p. 99.



tion was ever intended by these organized societies seems utterly absurd, notwithstanding the severe repressive measures that the government deemed necessary from 1792 to 1798. It seems quite probable that these large assemblies, which excluded none and which comprised many of the poor and idle, some men were to be found who were revolutionary in spirit and who would gladly have favored designs detrimental to public security.

Yet the accusation that the mass were of this type is without foundation. It is true that they imitated the French in many ways. They took the name of "Citizen" and adopted the word "Citizeness" so as to give the same appellation to women.<sup>1</sup>

St. Andre Barrere, and Citizen Poland of the national convention of France, were made honorary members of the London Corresponding Society.<sup>2</sup> Resolutions were adopted extolling the French for their own success and for the wonderful revolution they had prepared for the rest of the world, and declaring that the British government must be purified, and that political changes must take place in their own country.<sup>3</sup> But as Mr. Tooke said at his own trial, in expressing admiration for some of the French ideas, they were not accepting French doctrines as a whole nor approving French excesses, any more than one would be declaring himself a Mohammedan if he expressed admiration for some portion of the Koran. It was brought out at this trial that some of the most objectionable measures that were interpreted as revolutionary by the authorities, were passed

1. Ostragorski, Democracy and Organization of Political Parties, vol. II, p. 124.
2. Howell, State Trials, vol. 24, p. 318.
3. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 31, pp. 479 to 485.

when only four or five members were present, and things not properly passed were often ~~in~~<sup>1</sup>officially written in the books by others than the secretary. In one place a vast number of papers, 200,000 copies, were ordered to be printed and disseminated,<sup>2</sup> while as a matter of fact not any were printed. In this way the plans and actions of the societies, as shown in the documents, may have appeared much more formidable and radical than they actually were. But even admitting them to be practically authentic, the fears of the ruling class led them sometimes, if not always, to give a partial interpretation to the documents. A letter from the Society for Constitutional Information to the Norwich Society, advising them to leave Monarchy alone, and to insist upon universal suffrage, was interpreted in itself as meaning to leave Monarchy alone for the present until they would be able to uproot it.<sup>3</sup> Besides this, the utter absurdity of some of the accusations was made apparent at the trials. The revenues of the Constitutional Society, which had been capable of supporting a revolution, was discovered to amount to only 60 pounds per year, 50 of which went to the expenses of the society for rooms, paper, pens, messengers,<sup>4</sup> etc., leaving 10 pounds with which to "overturn" the government. A certain letter, seemingly of a serious nature, written by Jeremiah Joyce to Mr. Tooke, had been intercepted. It ended with the query, "Is it possible to get ready by Thursday?" This "terrific missile" which filled the ministers with the greatest alarm and led to the immediate detention and trial of

1. Howell, State Trials, vol. 25, p. 99.

2. Ibid., vol. 25, p. 90.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., vol. 25, p. 85.

Stephen, Life of Tooke, vol. II, p. 144.

Tooke, was found to relate to an agreement to select from the court calender a list of all places held by the Grenvilles, in order to throw odium on Pitt and his family.<sup>1</sup> During the trial Tooke understood a certain song was to be brought forward by the Attorney General to incriminate him. As the words were wholly inoffensive Tooke expressed his willingness to hum it for the judge and jury so that if anything treasonable lurked in the tune it might be detected.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the occasionally extravagant and seditious language of these societies, there was never at any time any danger of a revolution. The whole aim and purpose seems to have been by petition, by correspondence, by meetings, by publications, in every way possible to arouse inquiry and discussion, and so to create a general demand for the object sought. They advocated a full, free, and fair representation of the people. To the adherents of the old system this in itself seemed revolutionary. Any reformer was likely to be tried for high treason. A comparison of the number of trials preceeding and during the French Revolution for treason, libel, sedition, and conspiracy, shows the extent to which the government was alarmed. In the six years from 1783 to 1789 there were only three trials, while in the four years from 1793 to 1796 there were 73 trials. The repressive measures of the government in these prosecutions, in the suspension of the habeas corpus act, in the restriction of the liberty of public meetings, and in the

1. Stephen. Life of Tooke, vol. II, p. 144.

2. Ibid., vol. II, p. 152.

3. Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 35, p. 478.

suppression of the press, resulted in the rapid decline of these societies. The less radical members gradually withdrew from the central committee of the London Corresponding Society. In 1798 all the remaining members of the committee<sup>1</sup> were arrested and kept in prison without trial for three years. With their definite organization broken up, the societies necessarily ceased to have any active life. But the fact that this large number of people so quietly submitted to the suppressive measures of the government, shows the nature of the movement. It was a sort of academic enthusiasm, a political fermentation, rather than any sane, well-grounded desire for the immediate reform of parliament. Every one talked reform, vigorously affirmed the inalienable right of the people to reform, and applauded radical speakers; but probably very few of all these agitators were ready to make any material sacrifice for the attainment of the objects they demanded.

The immediate or direct effect of this movement was not great, but it is important as marking the beginning of the radical agitation of the next thirty years. A casual glance over the field would indicate this. Many of the foremost leaders of the movement when it re-appeared after 1815, developed their radical opinions during the early stage of the French Revolution. When the revolution broke out, Burdett was residing in Paris, where he heard the debates of the National Assembly and attended the meetings of the political clubs. In 1793 he returned to England, formed a close friendship with Horne Tooke, joined the Constitutional Association, and entered Parliament where he

1. Kent, The English Radicals, pp. 149, 204.

was soon recognized as the champion of popular rights. He supported Grey's motion for reform, and uttered a vehement indictment against the government on account of its encroachment upon public rights, and declared the war against France was "a futile attempt to stifle the flame of liberty."<sup>1</sup> Hunt was placed in prison in 1793, where he listened to discontented persons and imbibed radical views. He was also largely influenced by Horne Tooke, with whom he became intimately acquainted in 1800. In 1807 he organized the Bristol Constitutional Association in imitation of the earlier society, of which Tooke was the leading member. Cobbett was in France studying previous to 1792, and although he did not begin to take the popular side till 1804, he may unconsciously have been influenced by the French Revolution. When quite young Hone was sent to London to an Attorney's office and was said to have been influenced by the democratic principles of the London Corresponding Society.<sup>2</sup> Place joined the London Corresponding Society in 1794, was a member of the general committee of that society in London and acted as chairman at their weekly meetings.<sup>3</sup> Thistlewood, already inclined to radicalism, through reading the works of Paine, went to Paris before the downfall of Robespierre, and returned to England in 1794, firmly convinced that the first duty of the patriot was to massacre the government and to over-turn every existing institution.<sup>4</sup> Bentham was elected a French citizen by the National Convention, and before the close of the eighteenth century was a well-recognized

1. Stephen, Life of Tooke, vol. II, p. 233.

Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 35, p. 947.

2. Gentleman's Magazine, 1843, p. 60.

3. Kent, The English Radicals, p. 204.

4. Alison, History of Europe, vol. II, p. 255.

radical. Hume's radicalism is said to have been due to the influence and training of Place.<sup>1</sup> Thus it is seen that practically all the radical leaders of the first twenty years of the nineteenth century were either directly connected with the radical movement of the early nineties or were indirectly influenced by its leaders.

The popular agitation which reached its height after the close of the Napoleonic wars and which these leaders did so much to inflame, centered in the same districts in which the societies flourished in 1793, and among the same class of people who were first aroused by the French Revolution.<sup>2</sup> It is true that after the close of the Napoleonic war, the economic conditions produced a universal popular distress which could have accounted for the riots and disturbances if no Jacobine theories had ever existed. But it is probable that more or less radical agitation for parliamentary reform had existed beneath the surface all through this period from 1800 to 1820. It is not probable that the thousands of people raised to such a height of enthusiasm during the first years of the French Revolution ever again regarded the matter with indifference, or that, if the idea of popular rights had not been preserved and agitated through all this period, the lower class, during a time of severe economic depression, would have turned to parliamentary reform as a panacea for all their ills. Since the privilege of organization was denied them there was no effective way for the radicals, during this period, to express

1. Kent, The English Radicals, p. 211.

2. Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, vol 35, p. 447.

their views, so that we can not estimate their force numerically as was possible during the first stage of their existence.

There were a few attempts to revive the political associations. In 1811 the Hampden and the Union societies were founded, and in 1814 the Spenceans, but none of these ever attained any degree of importance. During the discontent after the close of the war when they began to be somewhat extended, the government immediately adopted repressive measures and they soon practically ceased to exist.<sup>1</sup> But the organizations, to the extent that they did progress, were similar to the societies of the early nineties. They consisted of the same class from the same place, the higher order, the middle class, and the agricultural population again refusing to have any thing to do with their projects.<sup>2</sup> They again assumed symbols of the French Revolution. Members addressed one another as Citizen and Citizeness, tri-colored flags were carried and the manufacture of tri-colored ribbons and cockades was encouraged.<sup>3</sup> They were like the early societies, too, in the fact that their ideas were largely theoretical and philosophical, and their designs rather to disseminate political principles and to democratize the country than to accomplish any definite and immediate results.

But from the time of the French Revolution all radical agitation held forth parliamentary reform as a goal to be finally

1. Kent, The English Radicals, P. 274.

2. Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, vol. 35, p. 446.

3. Ibid., vol. 35, pp. 443 to 481.

Cambridge Modern History, vol. 10, p. 371

reached. As time went on the theoretical demand became more and more a practical demand, and this same radical agitation, first aroused by the French revolution, had much to do with the final realization of the ideal of a Parliament adequately representing the people as a whole, so composed and so organized that in any emergency it can immediately respond to the voice of the people, as can no other government in the world.



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